

## WANDA BŁEŃSKA (1911-2014)

**W**anda Maria Błęńska was born to Teofil Błęński and Helena Brunsz on October 30, 1911, in Poznań, Poland. On December 9 of the same year, she was baptized in the parish of St. Martin, also in Poznań. Because Wanda's mother fell ill, the family moved to Puszczykowo, but Helena's condition did not improve. At only fifteen months old, little Wanda became motherless. In 1920, with her father and her brother Roman, she moved again, this time to Toruń. There she made her First Communion and attended the girls' high school. In 1928, she graduated, receiving a high school diploma and then took the first step to realize her dream, returning to Poznań to study at the School of Medicine.

Although she had to wait several years to go on a mission, during her studies, she worked sedulously in missionary organizations both in Poznań and at the national level. Initially she was part of a missionary group with the Marian Sodality Movement, where the idea of founding a Missionary Academic Circle was born.

On January 20, 1927, in the main hall of the University of Poznań and in the presence of Cardinal August Hlond, the Primate of Poland, the first Missionary Academic Circle was inaugurated. At that time about 150 people were involved. Soon, groups of this kind were established at the Universities of Krakow, Leopoldis, Lublin, Warsaw, and Vilnius. Today, the Poznań Missionary Academic Circle, reactivated in 2002, bears the name of Wanda Błęńska and sends young people each year for missionary experiences.

Wanda actively participated in the organization of the International Congress of Missionary Academic Circles held in Poznań from Septem-

ber 28 - October 2, 1927, which was boasted the participation of over two thousand people. At that time, the Association of Academic Mission Societies in Poland was founded and Wanda was appointed to the Central Council. For years she participated in national and international missionary conferences. In 1931, she became a member of the board of directors of the Poznań missionary group. She also participated in the editorial board of *Annales Missiologicae*, the first missionary journal in Poland, which, after the interruption of the war, resumed its publication under the new title of *Annales Missiologicae Posnanienses*. In 1932, Wanda received a diploma from Pope Pius XI to encourage the spread of the work of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Wanda graduated with a medical degree on June 20, 1934. After finishing her studies, she returned to Toruń, where she first worked in the municipal hospital, and then, until the end of the war, at the National Institute of Hygiene. In 1942, she entered the ranks of the secret military organization Gryf Pomorski, later incorporated into the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), the main resistance movement in Nazi occupied Poland. In 1978, she was awarded the Military Cross of the Home Army. On June 23, 1944, her name day, Wanda was arrested for her conspiratorial activity. In prison, she was sentenced to death, but in the end, after more than two months in prison, she was released.

After the war, she took over the management of a hospital in Toruń and worked in the Hygiene Department in Gdańsk. In 1946, she decided to go to her dying brother, Roman, who was living in Germany. Not having received her passport, she traveled clandestinely in the coal storage of a ship destined for Lübeck and was able to join her ailing brother. After his death, she was not allowed to return to Poland and remained in Germany, where she worked in Polish military hospitals. In 1947, she attended a tropical medicine course in Hamburg. She then moved to England, where she continued her education in the field of tropical medicine and was admitted to the Royal Association of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in

London. There she met a missionary priest member of the Congregation of the White Fathers, who told her about plans to build a leper colony in Fort Portal, Uganda. In 1950, Dr. Błęńska received an invitation to work in Uganda from the local bishop, and in March of the same year began her service at the Fort Portal hospital. Unfortunately, however, the leper colony was never built.

The hospitals of Nyenga and Buluba, built in the 1930s by Mother Kevin, foundress of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa, were the first centers for the treatment of leprosy in Uganda. For years only nurses and laboratory technicians worked there because there were no doctors. On April 24, 1951, Błęńska arrived in Buluba, on Lake Victoria, and began her work in St. Francis Hospital, where she remained for another forty years as a doctor and lay missionary.

At the beginning, the working conditions were deplorable, but Wanda modernized both institutions, bringing them to a high level of treatment and patient care. In 1956, she founded a training center for medical assistants for the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy, which today bears her name. She taught many students in several African countries, participated in the International Congress of Doctors on Leprosy and became one of the most qualified specialists in the world in the treatment of this disease.

In the early eighties, Dr. Błęńska entrusted the management of the center in Buluba to her pupil, Dr. Joseph Kawumie, though she remained there working as a medical advisor until 1992. In 1986, she went with Father Marian Żelazek to India, where for nine months she worked in a center for lepers in Puri. The two Polish missionaries were united by a sincere friendship for many years.

Wanda Błęńska won the hearts of the people of Uganda not only through her professional skills but also through her compassionate approach to the sick. She was called the Mother of the Lepers. Thanks to her work, she helped overcome the social stigma against those struck with Hansen's disease and took many actions to restore their dignity. She examined them

without gloves, unless a wound was open or when she was operating, because she did not want them to feel disrespected. Years later, she recounted, “First of all, I wanted to get my patients accustomed and familiar with their illness to lessen their fear. As with any disease, even with leprosy, one must become familiar. These patients are poor. There are always many people who make them feel afraid. Sometimes when an atmosphere of fear is created, it spreads, it is contagious. I always said to everyone, ‘Look at me, are my fingers infected?’ Obviously, I kept the usual hygienic principles. After examining a patient, I washed my hands. But I washed them not only after examining someone with leprosy, but after each patient, so that everyone could see that this gesture belongs to the habits of every doctor.”

Wanda Błęńska returned to Poland in 1992, but for two years she traveled between her two countries (Poland and Uganda). She re-settled permanently in Poznań in 1994. She went to Uganda for the last time in 2006. Despite her advanced age, she participated in the missionary life of the Church until the end of her life. Until the age of 93 she taught at the Warsaw Missionary Training Center. On June 7, 2003, the Institute for Lay Missionaries of the Polish Episcopal Conference was named in honor of her. For many years she visited schools, parishes, pastoral centers, and missionary groups, particularly inspiring children and adolescents. “When I talk to young people,” she said, “I always say: if you have some good and bright idea, cultivate it! Do not let it fall asleep, do not refuse it! Even if it seems impossible to reach and too difficult, do not be discouraged. You must cultivate your dreams!”

In addition to attending missionary conferences and conventions, Wanda organized medical and financial assistance for missionaries and missions, even with her own money. She was part of the group of organizers of the *Redemptoris Missio Humanitarian Aid Foundation* and was an honorary member of the foundation’s Council. A private school in Poznań and a school complex in Niepruszew both bear her name. She received numerous awards and honors, including the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Cross, the *San*

*Silvestro* Medal, the *Order of Poland* (which she later decided to return), honorary citizenship of Uganda, the title of Doctor *Honoris Causa* from the Academy of Medical Sciences in Poznań, and, from children, the *Order of Smiles*.

Wanda Błęńska died in Poznań on November 27, 2014, at the age of 103. Currently, the Archdiocese of Poznań is gathering all the material concerning the life and sanctity of Dr. Wanda Błęńska to begin the process of beatification.

